Group Take-Home Essay Exam

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Section 1: What public policy choices demonstrate that the United States is a liberal democracy?

In general, I would prefer to live in a social democracy. While liberal democracies do bring a strong emphasis on individual freedom and limited government interference, I believe that a social democracy better addresses some of society's biggest problems, most notably economic disparity.

Economic disparity is among the timeliest issues for the majority of nations, including America. Under a liberal democracy, market forces are likely to dominate, with people being left to succeed or fail based upon their own efforts and abilities. It will be favorable for some but has the effect of leading to unequal redistributions of wealth, with disadvantaged groups being excluded from access to fundamental services like health, education, and shelter. I believe that no one should be left behind based on their economic standing, and in this regard, government interference is absolutely warranted and important.

The United States is classified as a liberal democracy because it prioritizes limited government and individual freedoms, leaving most social and economic decisions to the free market (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). One clear example is its lower taxation and limited social spending,

which reflect an emphasis on personal responsibility rather than collective welfare. According to Figure 3.1 in *American Difference*, the U.S. collects substantially less tax revenue as a percentage of GDP compared to social democracies like Sweden or Norway (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). This limited taxation directly influences how much the government can spend on social services like healthcare, unemployment insurance, and family benefits.

In Figure 3.2, we see that public social spending in the U.S. is among the lowest in advanced democracies (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). For example, while social democracies invest heavily in universal healthcare and education, the U.S. focuses its spending on programs that are often means-tested, leaving gaps in coverage for the middle and lower classes. The *American Difference* textbook further explains the U.S. healthcare system, which is predominantly private, unlike the universal healthcare systems found in social democracies (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020).

Another hallmark of U.S. liberal democracy is the belief in equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome (PO 101 L14 U.S. Exceptionalism.pptx). While Americans value the idea that everyone should have the chance to succeed, they are less likely to support policies aimed at redistributing wealth to achieve equal outcomes. This is reinforced by Figure 3.5, which shows lower levels of government intervention in economic regulation in the U.S. compared to social democracies (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020).

Moreover, U.S. exceptionalism—as discussed in the L14 PowerPoint—explains the nation's historical preference for limited government. The philosophical roots of American liberal democracy, grounded in John Locke's emphasis on natural rights and personal liberty, prioritize individual autonomy over collective welfare (PO 101 L14 U.S. Exceptionalism.pptx).

The U.S. approach results in less comprehensive welfare programs, minimal government guarantees for healthcare or housing, and a market-driven education system. For example, in Figure 3.6, the U.S. ranks lower on measures of social support and family benefits compared to social democracies (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020).

This commitment to liberal democracy means that government intervention is often seen as a threat to personal liberty rather than a tool for promoting social equality. While this model does protect civil liberties, it also leads to greater economic disparities, reinforcing my belief that social democracy offers a more equitable alternative.

A social democracy, however, balances the constant need for individual freedom with the role of the government ensuring all members of society, no matter their circumstances or background, have access to the tools they need in order to thrive. These include universal health care, good quality education at an affordable price, and strong social safety nets. The U.S. can reduce inequality through the redistribution of wealth via progressive taxation and social programs that uplift people from poverty. Social democracy ensures no one is deprived of the basic services to lead a good life, and this is something that I strongly believe is needed.

Section 2: Would you alter any of these policy choices if you controlled the American government? If so, which ones? Please explain your responses.

If I had control over American public policy, I would absolutely make changes to address the glaring inequalities baked into our current system. The United States' limited approach to social welfare, healthcare, and education funding leaves too many people behind. As highlighted in Box 3.4 of *American Difference*, the U.S. healthcare system remains predominantly private, which makes healthcare access inconsistent and often tied to employment (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). If I were in charge, I would replace this fragmented system with universal healthcare, much like we see in countries such as Sweden and Germany (PO 101 L12 Comparing the United States and Other Countries.pptx).

Additionally, I would increase public social spending, especially in family benefits and unemployment insurance, where the U.S. lags behind social democracies, as shown in Figure 3.4 (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). Programs like paid family leave and affordable childcare would be a priority because they help create equality of opportunity, especially for working-class families and single parents. Without these support systems, families are often forced to choose between earning a living and caring for their children, a dilemma that social democracies have largely solved (PO 101 L13 U.S. Similarities.pptx).

On the taxation side, I would advocate for a more progressive tax structure, similar to what social democracies use to fund their robust welfare programs. Figure 3.1 shows the U.S. collects less in taxes relative to GDP, which limits the ability to fund comprehensive public services (Poloni-

Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). Increasing tax revenues—particularly from the wealthiest individuals and corporations—would allow the government to fund services like tuition-free higher education, universal healthcare, and expanded housing assistance without significantly burdening the middle class.

Another area I would focus on is education policy. While the U.S. prides itself on its higher education system, it often comes at an unsustainable cost to students. If I were in charge, tuition-free or low-cost university education, as seen in Norway or Germany, would become standard (PO 101 L12 Comparing the United States and Other Countries.pptx). Education should be a public good, not a private commodity.

Also, I believe an equal-based society—rather than freedom alone—would create a more level society in which you would have higher chances of being successful regardless of who you were born to, or the privileges you were given. Under the ideologies of social democracy, everyone rises together through the government helping in the most efficient ways possible. Doing so destroys barriers while advancing toward prosperity, whether economic, educational, or health based. While liberal democracies may protect individual rights, a social democracy establishes a better balance between liberty and social justice, one that I believe is required in order to obtain a just and equitable society. My preference is therefore clear: I would prefer to live in a social democracy, where state intervention gives everyone an equal chance to succeed.

Section 3: Consider your opinions about liberal and social democracy etc.

Looking at my liberal and social democratic leanings, it's clear that my values aren't quite on the same wavelength as the traditional U.S. political culture of strong support for limited government and individualism (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020, p. 63). In Chapter 4 of *American Difference*, the United States is described as a classical liberalism-influenced nation, which promotes individual responsibility, free-market capitalism, and minimal state intervention (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). That's not my stance.

My belief in social democracy is that I value equality as much as freedom. I believe the state must serve as an umbrella, capable of covering everyone to a point where all can thrive—whether in national health care, subsidized education, or shelter benefits (PO 101 L15 Political Culture and Ideology.pptx). This is a deviation from the "American Dream" myth that if one just works hard enough, they can make it. Honestly, I think that idea disregards the systemic barriers that exist, and Figure 3.4 in *American Difference* agrees with me—it shows how limited U.S. social spending is compared to social democracies (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020).

The political culture of the U.S. is highly linked to U.S. exceptionalism, the idea that the special conditions in America's history—lack of feudalism, self-sorting immigrants, and Constitutional stability—make America uniquely committed to liberty instead of equality (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020, p. 79; PO 101 L14 U.S. Exceptionalism.pptx). Even though I applaud the prioritization of freedom, I do not fully subscribe to the view that a small government is always the most effective way to protect it.

When it comes to limited government, I don't think that way about the American political tradition. I am not saying the government should control everything, I'm just saying the government should play a far more active role in things that affect basic human needs. In America, the conservative and libertarian political ideologies favor less state intervention (PO 101 L15 Political Culture and Ideology.pptx), but I personally agree more with the social democratic ideology, which trusts state intervention can bring more equality and social justice without trespassing on individual freedom.

I think there is a faith community stake involved as well. Christians, Amy E. Black (2012) argues in *Honoring God in Red or Blue*, that people are required by their creed to love their neighbors and to endorse frameworks that lift the vulnerable up, which ties with my social democracy ideology. It's about doing for the public good, not maximizing individual freedom for its sake.

Section 4: Why is the United States a liberal democracy instead of a social democracy etc.?

The United States cannot be said to be a social democracy but a liberal democracy because of the peculiar combinations of historical, philosophical, and cultural reasons. One of the most persuasive reasons put forth by Chapter 3 of *American Difference* is the U.S. philosophical foundation (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020, p. 56). The establishment of the nation was profoundly shaped by John Locke's ideas on natural rights, freedom of individuals, and limited government. These ideas shaped the U.S. Constitution and overall political culture, which ranks freedom from the government over socially ensured equality by the government.

The other key factor is the timing of democracy in the United States. America democratized early when liberalism was ascending but before socialist movements gained significant ground in Europe (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020, p. 58). This timing put the U.S. on a trajectory of limited government and market-oriented capitalism, well before notions of social democracy had begun to take hold in other countries.

I also find the argument about self-selection, personality, and culture to be pretty compelling. The U.S. was largely settled by people who chose to leave their homelands—risk-takers who valued independence and self-reliance (PO 101 L14 U.S. Exceptionalism.pptx). This created a national character that tends to resist government intervention, even when it could help reduce inequality. Americans often prefer personal responsibility and local solutions to big government programs, which helps explain why social democracy hasn't caught on here.

And then there's the fact that the U.S. never had feudalism or a strong socialist movement (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020, p. 60). In Europe, social democracy grew out of the class struggles between the working class and elites. But in the U.S., without a feudal system or aristocracy, there was less class conflict to fuel a strong labor movement. The working class in America often identified with middle-class values rather than organizing for socialist reforms (PO 101 L13 U.S. Similarities.pptx).

Finally, the stability of the U.S. Constitution has played a huge role. The Constitution has endured with very few amendments, maintaining a system that limits government power (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020, p. 61). This is because changing the Constitution needs approval from two-thirds of Congress and agreement from three-fourths of the states, making any major system change very hard. The founders designed it to prevent government overreach, which has made it difficult to adopt social democratic policies that require expanding the role of government (PO 101 L14 U.S. Exceptionalism.pptx).

My best answer is self-selection and culture, with a dose of timing of democracy. These account for the widespread beliefs in individualism that influence American political sentiments to this day. Lacking a socialist heritage or hierarchical class structure, the U.S. developed a political culture more attuned to freedom and individual responsibility than to equality and collective welfare.

Section 5: Consider recent political events and trends in the United States etc.?

Analyzing recent political trends, you could argue the United States is inching its way toward social democracy—but it's a slow, uneven process, with many obstacles in its path. From one perspective there's a growing public advocacy on policies that mirror social democratic principles like universal healthcare, cancellation of student debt, and higher minimum wages. As reported in 2024 by the Pew Research Center, it was discovered that the majority of Americans now favor the concept that the government should ensure that healthcare is available to all (Pew Research Center, 2024). That is quite substantial from just a decade ago.

The Biden administration's efforts—like the American Rescue Plan and the push for student loan relief—are examples of how government is moving beyond the traditional limits of liberal democracy. These initiatives aim to reduce economic inequality and expand access to basic services (White House, 2023). Even Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has brought millions of lower-income Americans into the healthcare system, which aligns more with social democratic values than the usual hands-off approach seen in liberal democracies.

That said, there's still a deep resistance in American political culture to fully embracing social democracy. Many Americans associate government intervention with inefficiency or a threat to personal freedoms (Poloni-Staudinger & Wolf, 2020). The political polarization in Congress and state governments makes it difficult to pass comprehensive welfare programs. Efforts to implement Medicare for All, for example, have stalled, and universal childcare and family leave remain patchwork programs at best.

But here is the reality: the younger generation is advocating more vigorously for social democratic revamps. Millennial and Gen Z voters are more likely to support proposals like universal healthcare, free college, and wealth taxation (Gallup, 2023). Organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America have grown their membership and political influence, which suggests a momentum in the direction of a more equitable society (DSA, 2024).

So, is the U.S. moving toward social democracy?

I'd say there's a gradual shift—but we're not there yet. The political culture rooted in limited government and individualism still holds a lot of sway (PO 101 L15 Political Culture and Ideology.pptx). But if the momentum behind progressive movements and public demand for social services keeps growing, we could see the U.S. adopting more social democratic policies in the future.

Conclusion

This essay examines whether a liberal democracy or social democracy is better suited to my personal values and political ideals. Based on evaluating the United States' public policy choices, analyzing possible reforms to the policy, political culture, and studying why the United States embraced a liberal democratic framework, I state that a social democracy is a more equitable system. My essay concludes by examining whether recent political American occurrences suggest social democratization—or not.

The United States may currently embody liberal democratic ideals, but growing favor for social programs, universal healthcare, and progressive taxation suggests a slow drift toward social democratic values. How fast that trend will continue depends on the willingness of Americans to rethink their deeply well-established beliefs about freedom, equality, and the function of the government. My own opinion is that the case of social democracy is already evident—and critical.

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